NEWS

Ukraine Defense Minister Vows to Keep Forces in Iraq - 2004-08-13

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Ukraine has told the visiting U.S. defense secretary that its contingent of troops in Iraq will remain in that country for the forseeable future.

Ukraine's defense minister, Yevhen Marchuk, told U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that the country plans to maintain its contingent for now at its current level of around 1600 troops.

Publicly he gave no reason for the apparent change of policy, which came just weeks after Mr. Marchuk indicated Ukraine might withdraw the soldiers.

On his brief visit to the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, Mr. Rumsfeld thanked his Ukrainian counterpart for the announcement, praising what he called Kiev's support for the mission to help rebuild the new Iraq.

Ukraine's contingent is the fourth largest group sent to assist the U.S.-led coalition in reconstruction and its efforts to maintain security in the face of the violent insurgency.

Ukrainian troops are largely involved in training Iraqi security forces.

Mr. Rumsfeld also met with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, who told his guest that Ukraine wants to continue working toward closer integration with Western nations.

This also was something of a reversal of recently stated policy. Mr. Kuchma had previously backed away from plans to push for eventual membership in the European Union and even the NATO military alliance.

Both organizations say it will be a long time before this might happen, and have watched cautiously as Ukraine has sought closer economic and political integration with Russia and other former Soviet republics.

Ukraine's future policies are unclear, given that a presidential election is to take place on October 31.

Mr. Kuchma is not a candidate in the election, and a key opposition politician is seen as having a chance to win if the voting is free and fair.

Ukraine is Mr. Rumsfeld's latest stop in a trip through the region that so far has included Afghanistan and Azerbaijan.

On Saturday the U.S. defense secretary is to meet Russia's defense minister, Sergei Ivanov, in St. Petersburg.